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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000430

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: JANUARY 22 UPDATE: THAKSIN ACTS - GOVERNMENT
OVERREACTS

REF: BANGKOK 151

Classified By: DCM Alexander A. Arvizu, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Recent media interviews by ousted Prime Minister Thaksin in Singapore received wide newspaper coverage in Thailand (despite the fact that the broadcasts were blocked locally) leading to criticism of government censorship while feeding local animosity towards Singapore. Separately, on August 20, police detained 15 suspects (eight of whom were military officers) for involvement in the New Year's Eve bombing attacks, raising concern over increased tension between the police and military. Southern insurgent groups continue to deny any involvement in the bombings. Meanwhile, all 35 members of the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) have been chosen; the next step will be to select the CDC's chairman. END SUMMARY

THAKSIN ON TV

12. (C) As forecast, ousted Prime Minister Thaksin has increased his profile, giving interviews last week to CNN and Asian Wall Street Journal from Singapore; over the weekend he was interviewed again, at greater length, on CNN's Talk Asia program. CNN interviews were blocked (although we understand that the cable company here missed the Saturday morning retransmission of Talk Asia), but print and broadcast media gave wide coverage, in any case, to what Thaksin said, and many press outlets criticized the interim government for the heavy-handed censorship.

13. (C) The government/CNS have also launched a campaign to retaliate against Singapore for allowing Thaksin to use it as a platform for his new media strategy, and for the Deputy Prime Minister's decision to have a "private" lunch with him. The RTG canceled a planned civil service exchange and withdrew an outstanding invitation to the Singapore Foreign Minister. In addition, Gen Sonthi has publicly raised concerns that Singapore might be listening in on cell phone calls between high-ranking Thai officials. From a contact within the RTA, we learned that CNS-member General Saphrang had ordered a subordinate to "drop everything" and look for ways to get the RTG secure communications gear that could not

be monitored by Shin Corp or AIS (former Thaksin holdings sold to Singapore's Temasek in the controversial sale of Thaksin assets last January.) At the same time, authorities have said that they do not intend to target other elements of Thai-Singapore cooperation, such as military cooperation. The government's tough line on Singapore has been, on the whole, fairly popular, to judge by media reaction.

14. (C) Contacts at the Singapore Embassy have been reluctant to discuss the situation at length. A Singaporean diplomat told us last week that, although the RTG's public stance has been tough, privately the MFA and police were being helpful on issues like controlling the protests at the Singapore chancery. Diplomats were hopeful that the spat would not escalate. A contact at the MFA said that the Foreign Ministry was being put in the position of "bad cop," acting on directions from either PM Surayud or the CNS (he wasn't sure which) to retaliate against Singapore. This meant that diplomatic, rather than economic or military programs, were targeted.

15. (C) Some local papers also carried reports over the weekend about US lobbying and public relations companies reportedly hired by Thaksin. Apparently that, and the US affiliation of CNN, earned us the attention of anti-Thaksin protesters: a small group demonstrating at the Singapore embassy on January 22 marched to our chancery as well for a brief and peaceful protest asking that the US support the current government instead of the Singaporeans.

16. (C) COMMENT: The government/CNS have overreacted to Thaksin, as usual. Their response to the interviews amounts to free advertising for Thaksin, and has called more

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attention to his interviews than they might otherwise have received, especially since they were given to English-language media. The CNS has risked alienating media outlets that have generally lent tacit support to the coup because of their strong opposition to Thaksin. At the same time, local feeling against Singapore seems to be genuine, in part because the perceived Singaporean insensitivity to issues involving Shin Corp and Thaksin. End comment.

NEW YEAR'S EVE BOMBING -- ROUND UP THE USUAL SUSPECTS

17. (C) Police brought in about 15 suspects for questioning in the New Year's Eve bombing on Saturday. Eight are military officers, and several appear to have been previously suspected by the police of involvement in the alleged August 24, 2006 car bomb attack against PM Thaksin. So far, PM Surayud has been relatively measured in his public response, but unnamed sources close to the CNS leadership have raised concerns about a possible police set-up. Gen. Sonthi warned the police commander (who is a member of the CNS) that he would be held responsible if the police were looking for "scapegoats." Meanwhile, the southern insurgent group PULO has again denied any involvement following an Australian press report which suggested they were behind the bombing. The PULO statement said the accusations were "a pretext to ... drag us unjustly into an unrelated regional conflict which is of no interest to us." This was PULO's second denial since the New Year's attacks.

18. (C) Comment: The police investigation into the Thaksin car bomb, and their accusations against military officers, caused a considerable rise in tensions between the police and military. The weekend arrests, at first glance, do not inspire confidence. The police are under pressure to produce a result, and are undoubtedly worried about the suspicions that police officers were involved in the attacks. The police may also be looking for ways to discredit the government's police reform plans.

19. (C) Comment continued: Regarding the possible PULO

connection, southern separatist groups do not normally claim credit for their attacks -- which since January 2004 have occurred exclusively in the far south. PULO is not the only southern group that could have been involved and the group has little proven operational ability. However, most observers are inclined to believe that the southern insurgents were not involved in the New Year's Eve bombings.
End Comment

CONSTITUTION DRAFTERS GET STARTED

¶10. (C) All 35 members of the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) have been chosen. Twenty-five were named by the elaborate and time-consuming selection process laid out in the interim constitution (whittled down from 2000 delegates from around the country); the other ten were selected by the CNS and include mostly legal experts, such as the head of the Law Society of Thailand. The next issue is the choice of the chairman of the CDC. The two main contenders are Charan Pukditanakul, Permsec of the Justice Ministry, and Squadron Leader Prasong Soonsiri, former NSC Secretary General, former Foreign Minister and recent coup

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plotter (reftel). Civil society likes Charan, who has a reputation for probity and who has good relations with the NGOs. For Prasong, there are suspicions that the government/CNS feels like he should get "something" in the way of a reward. He was passed over for the Cabinet, for head of the legislature (NLA) and for a few other distinguished assignments. Because of his close association with the coup, his election would almost certainly be viewed as another sign that the generals intend to control the constitution drafting process.

BOYCE